



California Department of Veterans Affairs

NEWS FOR VETERANS

Contact: Robert Glazier
Jerry Jones
Jaime Arteaga
Legislation and Public Affairs
916-653-2192
Fax 916-653-2611
December 20, 2004

FROM THE DESK OF SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TOM JOHNSON

Originally sent to the staff of CDVA on 12/17/04

Not only is this a Holiday message, it is also my 10-month report regarding the happenings and the future of our Department. First, let me wish you all a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! Special congratulations to the staff at the California Department of Veterans Affairs, for you are individually and collectively the engine that makes our service to veterans happen. I appreciate your hard work and the accomplishments you have achieved this past year. Please take care of yourself during the holidays. Best wishes also to all of you and your families for a healthy, happy and prosperous new year.

Last year was a year of transition and recovery for our department and the state. It certainly was a learning experience for me and I remain profoundly grateful and humbled at the opportunity to serve veterans and to serve in the Schwarzenegger Administration. I am also grateful for those people that have been appointed to join me in the department, especially Roger Brautigan, Robert Glazier, Bill Parente, and our two new Board members, Dr. Vernon Chong and Col. James Crump. They bring not only great experience and wisdom to their positions of responsibility, they also have a heart to serve veterans.

Next year there are several global, statewide issues that will affect us. First, the state is still in a difficult fiscal situation. The Legislative Analyst's Office estimates that in FY 05-06 California will have a \$7 Billion deficit. Although CDVA and veterans have been well supported by Governor Schwarzenegger and his Administration, the entire state government is under stress because the structural reforms necessary to resolve this deficit are long overdue. John Hanretty, Chief of Administrative Services, normally has a budget staff of 5, but due to transfers and vacancies he has been down to 1 or 2 staff during much of the budget preparation time. Nevertheless, he and his staff have worked tirelessly to get our budget and our Budget Change Proposals prepared. We came out very well but in all honesty, two of our biggest concerns are still "works in progress". They are:

1. Equipment and repair budget for the veteran's homes still lags behind our needs. Our strong arguments for a bigger budget for medical equipment (new and replacement) and for upkeep and maintenance did not result in the increases we requested. Rest assured, these are important issues we must keep on the front burner.
2. Staffing and the salaries and recruitment tools necessary to attract and retain staff are still not fully satisfied. This is a statewide problem as well as a state government problem and several other departments are also dealing with these issues. We also will keep this on the front burner.

The second global issue is the restructuring of state government, also known as the California

Performance Review. Many departments are anticipating significant changes with consolidations, eliminations and scope changes as part of the picture. We hope that our Department will be minimally affected at this point but we can expect some changes in how we do business resulting from the changes in other departments.

On other fronts, here is what is happening or will happen in our various divisions:

-Veterans Homes:

1. The planning continues for our new Veterans Homes. The Public Works Board met this past week and approved the next steps in our "acquisition without cost" land transfers for the Fresno and Redding Homes and we will soon select an architect for the Lancaster/Ventura homes.
2. I will be visiting all of the homes during the month of January for "town hall" meetings. I plan to meet with staff, managers, residents and the Allied Council. I'll be doing this at least twice a year and I am looking forward to a good exchange of ideas or thoughts.
3. I am encouraging continued involvement from our homes in the training of health care workers. Yountville is working with the North Bay Consortium, Chula Vista is in discussions with Southwestern College about clinical training and Barstow is talking with Victor Valley College. That's great! Keep it up.

-Cal Vet Program:

1. Renewed efforts at changing the law to allow veterans serving after January 1, 1977 to have access to our lowest rate (QVMB) loans will take place. We have already entered into discussions with various agencies about this matter and will pursue this vigorously.
2. We will continue to reduce our administrative expenses for this program so that we can be in line with industry averages. Recently we eliminated several positions in headquarters that were funded by Farm and Home and we reduced our housekeeping costs for the building by over \$200,000.
3. We will also look at new products and improved service wherever we can.

-Veterans Services:

1. We have already beefed up our San Diego office and hopefully will be able to beef it up again with the new budget. The LA office will also be augmented. The goal we all have is to see the percent of veterans in California receiving benefits go up from 10.29% to over 11%, which is near the national average. Go team!
2. The cemetery planning is proceeding with superb organizational skill by Jack Kirwan. He and his team are working to creatively manage the staffing and other requirements of this operation through contracts, partnerships and other efficient means. The scheduled opening is November of next year.

So, what other projects are we working on? Here are a few:

- A reorganization of our Human Resources Division which will provide better service and improved oversight and support of our Department's critical functions. This includes an orientation program for new staff, better training programs, and a recognition system. I'm very excited about these improvements.
- Better customer service. We just re-located some offices so that our veteran customers can more easily access us.
- Evaluating public/private partnerships for staff housing, nursing training, and potentially veteran housing.
- Seeking grants for solar power systems, nurse training or other department needs.
- Reducing expenses or seeking revenue opportunities, which will help us achieve some goals for which our budget is insufficient. Examples: auditing the golf course books, evaluating our parking lot revenues, establishing a memorial contribution fund, etc.

-Continuing our communications improvements. We're working on a database for all veteran services in California that can be accessed through our web site. We're also looking at having twice annual meetings with the Veteran Service Organization leadership in addition to the Secretary's Conferences.

-Working with the Governor's office regarding some scheduled visits to our homes this year or to special veterans events.

This is a sample of some of the projects or ideas that are taking shape for the coming year. In between these ideas, however, and central to our mission is what we do every day, i.e., we give care and service to veterans. I can't think of a more worthwhile vocation than to serve those who have served our country. Those of you who watch over our veterans in the homes 24/7, giving your expertise, your smile and your touch to an often lonely or sometimes discouraged or hurting person, thank you for all you do. Those of you, who process a loan, send out a statement, answer a question or manage an account for our Cal Vet loan holders, thank you. Those of you, who work with our County Veteran Service Officers, handle a claims appeal, work with the Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise or support a stand down, thank you. And last of all, those of you at headquarters who support all those good people who are directly in the line of helping veterans, thank you as well.

If we are not directly caring for or serving a veteran we all should be supporting those who do and I can only say a big Thank You to all the CDVA staff for helping us have a great 2004! Let's enjoy our families and friends during the holiday season and be ready for an even better 2005.

Tom Johnson, Secretary

Individuals or organizations wishing to subscribe or unsubscribe to this service may contact us via email at newsforveterans@cdva.ca.gov or by telephone at 1-800-952-5626 or 916-653-2192. For more news and information of interest to veterans, visit our website at <http://www.cdva.ca.gov/>.